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Are equity and sustainability a likely outcome when foxes and chickens share the same coop? Critiquing the concept of multistakeholder governance of food security

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Abstract

This article subjects to critical analysis the rapidly expanding ‘multistakeholder’ approach to policy deliberation and development programming. The past 15 years have witnessed an astonishing ascension of the narrative of the corporate private sector as the new paladin of development. This dubiously accredited actor enters the development world through “public-private partnerships” whose reputation as win-win affairs lacks validation by empirical research. The corporate sector joins – and often helps to convene - governance forums in which important policy decisions are taken and understandably deploys its efforts to further its interests. While there is a widespread aspiration today to build more inclusive, participatory governance in which the voices of those most affected by policy decisions can be heard and their rights defended, there are very great differences between this kind of practice and multistakeholder approaches in which differences in identities, interests, roles and responsibilities are ignored and power imbalances negated. This article seeks to make the distinction clear and to identify the challenges that multistakeholderism poses for the legitimacy of governance, the protection of common goods and the defense of human rights. It closes by pointing towards steps that could help to move from the multistakeholderism that characterizes the 2030 Agenda towards legitimate, participatory multi-actor deliberation.

Key words: multistakeholderism, public-private partnerships, corporate power, governance, UN SDGs, Committee on World Food Security

Introduction

There is a popular aspiration today to put in place governance arrangements that give voice to those most affected by the policies under debate and hold governments to account for their actions and for regulating those of corporate enterprises. Such approaches require clear parameters to ensure effective participation by the marginalized and to avoid corporate capture. There is an abyss between this kind of practice - often termed “multi-actor” in civil society circles - and what has come to be known as “multistakeholderism” in which everyone enters the room on the same footing, ignoring differences in interests, roles and responsibilities among the parties, and negating power imbalances. The former can make an important contribution to combatting inequality, social injustice, and the degradation of the environment. The latter is becoming a big part of the problem. This article, based on empirical considerations, will seek to make the distinction clear and will advocate a move from the currently dominant multistakeholderism orientation towards participatory multi-actor deliberation.

To do so it is necessary to illuminate the opacity of the concept and disentangle the knots of confusion it has accumulated over the past two decades. Multistakeholderism moved out of corporate boardrooms and into the space of global governance in the mid-1990s accompanied by the modality of public-private partnerships (PPPs). Two decades later, it has become an integral part of the implementation strategy for the UN’s post 2015 global development agenda, with special mention as a ‘systemic issue’ under goal 17 of
the SDGs. This evolution has been sustained by an astonishing ascension of the paradigm of the corporate private sector as a motor of development in general and food and nutrition security in particular. The political economy bedrock of this narrative is the advent of what has been termed a corporate food regime “coordinated by transnational corporate supply chains, with trade relations governed by IFIs, structural adjustment policies and WTO protocols” (McMichael 2013) to which the public sector has sold out responsibility for ensuring food security worldwide. In discursive terms, the paradigm reposes on the abiding tropes of modernization and productivity, appropriately doctored to counter criticisms of the social and ecological costs of corporate industrial food supply systems.

This article will explore the modalities and the implications of the arrival of multistakeholderism on the governance scene in five sections. The first will examine how the pillars of corporate power have developed with globalization, counting on the support of complicit public policies. The second will trace the emergence of multistakeholderism as a governance mode. It will discuss the growing proliferation of private and hybrid modalities for the governance of global supply chains and review the normalization of private sector actors as paladins of development. It will recall the history of the concept of multistakeholderism and how it has been applied to global governance. The third section will describe the current state of corporate influence on formal global governance. It will review the multiplication of multistakeholder platforms and partnerships and identify key challenges that these developments pose for the legitimacy of governance, the delivery of public goods and the defense of human rights. The fourth will examine how the concept of multistakeholderism relates to the reformed Committee on World Food Security, which is differentiated from other multilateral governance forums by the strong engagement of organizations representing those most affected by food insecurity and most active in building sustainable and equitable food systems. The conclusions will suggest some components of a strategy for addressing the spread of multistakeholderism.

1. The growth of corporate power

The power that corporations exercise in the realm of global governance is multidimensional. Different frameworks have been adopted to characterize the mutually reinforcing pillars on which it rests. An analytically useful distinction is one between instrumental, structural and discursive power (Fuchs 2007, Clapp and Fuchs 2009). Instrumental power is understood as the means by which corporations seek to wield direct influence on the outcomes of policy processes through actions such as lobbying or funding political campaigns, drawing on their financial, human and organizational resources and their access to influential figures. Structural power refers to the weight of corporations’ material position in the global economy and their resulting ability to reward or punish countries for their policy choices. It also includes corporations’ participation in private or hybrid governance and regulatory arrangements, heralding the blurring of the distinction between public and private spheres. Finally, discursive power refers to the role corporations play in framing issues and the use they make of narratives and norms that enhance their legitimacy (Clapp and Fuchs 2009: 8-11). The neo-Gramscian framework proposed by Levy and Newell (2002) places analogous emphasis on the dynamic interaction of what they term material, discursive and organizational resources in the “wars of position” in which they engage and stresses the demise of a credible distinction between conventional (market) and political (non-market) strategy.

Globalization has affected the scale, dimensions and interactions of these pillars. As the level of decision-making has escalated corporations have extended their instrumental attention from the national level to include global lobbying targets. Here they have achieved such victories as the shut-down of the UN Center
on Transnational Corporations in 1993 and the Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) agreement, largely drafted by corporation lawyers (Tawnsey and Rajotte 2008), which was adopted in 1994 in the context of the nascent WTO. They have also diversified and strengthened their global networking capacity and have added powerful allies like the big philanthrocapitalistic foundations to their lobbying line-ups.

In structural terms, the past few decades have witnessed an astounding concentration of the power of transnational agrifood corporations along global food chains. In dominant discourse this is assumed to be the natural result of the superior value-creation and managerial capacities of corporate capitalism. In reality without the complicity of powerful governments and the support of favorable neoliberal public policies corporate power would never have reached the levels it has attained. It is important to keep this in mind to avoid a simplistic characterization of (bad) corporations exploiting people and natural resources vs (valiant) governments defending public goods. From the outset global food governance has been a complicated mix of formal and informal public and private authority exercised at different levels. What has changed has been the level of concentration of corporate power and the increasingly predatory nature of a capitalism that is less and less concerned with producing goods and services and more and more with speculation and dispossession.

Transnational corporations (TNCs) dominate three strategic segments of the world food economy – provision of inputs, trade in agricultural commodities and food processing, and food retailing – and impinge on production as well by promoting industrial monocultures. Since the mid 1990s there has been an acceleration of the tendency towards concentration of market activity in an increasingly small number of increasingly powerful commodity conglomerates. The five largest traders in grains (Cargill, Bunge, Archer Daniels Midland – ADM, Gencore and Dreyfus) are estimated to control 75% of international trade in grains, dominantly corn, soy and wheat (De Schutter and Cordes 2011, p.7). At the same time, these economic actors practice vertical integration with enterprises operating at other stages of the production cycle – directly or indirectly – to ensure that they have unfailing access to the commodities in which they deal at prices favorable to them.

The multinational input industry received boost with the extension of “intellectual property” to cover the products of corporation laboratories. In a short time span the major private sector seed breeders have operated a massive take-over of the world’s commercial seed supply. Brand-name seeds subject to exclusive monopoly under Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs) accounted for 82% of the market worldwide by 2007 (ETC 2008, p.11), with the top three companies alone (Monsanto, Dupont and Syngenta) claiming almost 50% of the global proprietary seed market. IPRs are claimed to be justified as compensation for the resources invested in research and innovation by private companies, who have increasingly supplanted public sector research activities in agriculture. This ignores the far more compelling need to protect the rights of farmers themselves to save and exchange their own seeds, developed through centuries of anonymous effort and local knowledge, as well as the negative impacts of massive market control by a few corporations operating on a profit motive in this vital area.

Genetic modification of seeds has had an energizing effect on other areas of the corporate input business. GMOs are the glue that allow corporations to market packages combining seeds with other inputs to which

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1 The UPOV (International Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants) convention, which entered into force in 1968, and the TRIPS agreement of 1994 are important dates in this context.
they have been artificially rendered synergetic. This genetic “triumph” has stimulated mergers in the previously separate chemical and seed industries: the top three seed firms are among the top six pesticide firms. The oligopoly paradigm has spread to the entire food system. The same six multinationals – Monsanto, Du Pont, Syngenta, Bayer, Dow and BASF - control 75% of all private sector plant breeding research, 60% of the commercial seed market and 76% of global agrochemical sales (ETC Group 2011). The proposed agrochemical and seed industry “mega-mergers” between Bayer and Monsanto, Dow and Dupont, ChemChina and Syngenta that have hit the headlines over the past moths would risk reducing the top six to three. Motivated by investors’ interests, these deals would have negative consequences for important aspects of the food systems – in particular farmers’ seeds, biodiversity, and the environment (Clapp 2016). Yet the criteria by which regulators are examining them do not take these public goods into consideration and are limited instead to traditional economic concerns such as effects on competition and tax revenues.

The retail market is the latest arrival in the corporate-controlled global food chain. The giant in the field, Walmart, was incorporated only in 1969. Today it is the 2nd largest public corporation in the world, the largest retailer, and the biggest private employer with over two million employees. By 2007 the top 100 global food retailers had combined sales of $ 1.8 trillion representing 35% of all grocery retail sales worldwide (ETC 2008). Supermarket chains have moved into the Global South, aided by structural adjustment policies and WTO regulations that have opened up these economies to foreign direct investment. The number of Walmarts in Mexico rose from 14 in pre-NAFTA 1994 to 1,724 in 2012 (Rojo and Perez-Roche 2013).

A class of actors without functional links to food has entered into the globalized food system with increased force over the past decade. Financialization has abstracted food and land from their physical forms into highly complex agricultural commodity derivatives that are difficult to understand for all but seasoned financial traders (Clapp 2013, p.2). By the same token, it is increasingly difficult to establish cause and effect relationships and to hold investors accountable for the results of their speculation. Here too public policies have played an important role. The Commodities Futures Modernization Act adopted by the US Congress in 2000, which dismantled the regulation of financial derivatives, was very heavily determined by Wall Street lobbying. It has been reported that during the decade from 1998-2008 the major Wall Street banks directly contributed over $1.7 billion to the campaigns of US Congress representatives and senators and spent a further $ 3.4 billion on lobbyists charged with promoting deregulation (Essential Information and Community Education Foundation 2009).

The liberalization of global trade has played into the hands of the corporate food system. Only some 20% of all food produced in the world transits through international supply chains, yet the impacts of the way the global market is organized and the speculation it permits are visited on the local food systems of countries whose exports are minimal. OECD countries have actually increased their subsidies to their farmers in absolute terms since the WTO Agreement on Agriculture went into effect in 1995, allowing products to be put onto the market at prices that do not need to cover production costs. Governments in the Global South, instead, are forbidden to defend their local producers against the resulting unfair competition by protecting their markets. Bilateral free trade negotiations can be even more damaging to developing country interests. The latest generation of free trade and investment agreements have been labelled ‘corporate bills of rights’ (Engler 2013) for the way in which they favor transnational corporations (TNCs) on delicate issues like investor-state dispute settlements, Intellectual Property Rights, public procurement, and GMOs and over-ride the capacity of national parliaments and courts to defend citizens’ interests.
Discursive approaches provide important insights to understanding the rise and the impacts of corporate power since they underlie and legitimate the entire construct. “The increasing emphasis on efficiency, competitiveness and growth... has turned business into the politico-economic expert, the primary actor considered able to guarantee the provision of the desired good” (Fuchs 2007: 144). The agri-food businesses directly expend large amounts of funds seeking to influence public opinion, including by fabricating supportive evidence. Coca Cola has been caught financing scientific research aimed at casting doubt on science linking soda consumption to health problems (Nestle 2013). The Gates Foundation, which holds shares in Monsanto (Buczynski 2010), has funded pro GMO studies undertaken at prestigious universities. More profoundly, the corporations benefit from and subscribe to the overall paradigmatic and epistemological framework that underlies neoliberalism and legitimates a “certain” view of progress, modernity, innovation and development. In the realm of agriculture and food security the paradigm of productivism is a key peg in this construction (McKeon 2015: 69-73). In global arena, the corporate sector seeks to portray itself as the most genuinely interested and best placed to find solutions. At COP21 in Paris in December 2015 the corporations did an excellent job of selling themselves as the only actors present who were thinking globally, while governments were concentrating on national measures and demonstrating the incapacity of the multilateral system to act.

The relations between the interests of the corporate and financial sectors and the neo-liberal frameworks that support them are systemic. They constitute a food regime in the analysis of Friedmann and McMichael (1989), or “new constitutionalism” in the terminology used by Gills to describe the way in which rights of capital over states are enshrined in global agreements (Gills and Cutler 2014). Yet they are also dialectic, as Polyani - and Gramsci - suggest. The rules of the game seem “just the way things are” until the equilibrium on which they are based starts to wobble. The corporate food regime has promised cheap food coordinated by transnational corporate supply chains, legitimized with a food security – productivity - modernization narrative. Today food crises are putting into question its ability to feed the world and its high environmental costs are becoming increasing evident. The entry of new governmental players – the BRICS – has upset the previous balance, while mobilization by social movements is increasing the pressure for change. An interesting juncture in which to examine the promises and perils of multistakeholderism.

2. The emergence of multistakeholderism as a governance mode

The multilateral intergovernmental system of governance that was put in place following the Second World War was based on the political decision-making authority of sovereign states understood to be representative of their citizens’ interests. Over the past few decades the state’s quality of representation has been called into question by disaffected citizens and its political decision-making authority has been invaded by the growing weight of the economic sphere.

From public to private and multistakeholder regulation
Corporations exercise their structural influence also by helping to shape the rules of the game. Their role in regulation of the food system has increased through the rise of private standards and the decline of the state’s regulatory role (Lang et al. 2009, p.169). Developments such as increased capital mobility and changes in international financial regulation, competition for investment and the organization of

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2 Like the praise of GMOs published by Harvard professor Calestous Juma and his colleague Robert Paarlberg.

3 Intervention by Peter Newell at ISS Conference on Global Governance/Politics, The Hague, 4-5 February 2016.
production processes have created the conditions for a multifaceted and proactive exercise of corporate influence regarding rules-setting and application (Fuchs 2007). The resulting web of public, public–private, quasi, and private regulation operating at multiple levels does not add up to anything that resembles a coherent global system. On the contrary, the maze of overlapping competencies and jurisdictions leaves ample space for the operations of what has been termed “transnational neopluralism”, allowing interest groups to interact with regulators to skew the system in favor of special capital interests.4

Corporations are undertaking global governance functions - beyond the purely economic or managerial - in the realm of global supply chains. Changes in the organization of global supply chains away from direct command and control and towards managing complex networks of partners and contractors put corporations in the position of acting “as institutions of global governance themselves”, developing regimes of private law to govern relations within the networks while also seeking to influence public law institutions (May 2015: 1). “The decisions and actions of corporations have social consequences largely indistinguishable from those created by public regulators, but...are largely insulated from public participation, engagement or security” (Danielson quoted in May op. cit.: 5). The implications of this “direct politicization” of global supply chains with regard to how roles and responsibilities of state and non-state actors can and should be allocated have been insufficiently addressed (Macdonald 2014 p. 5).

Seen against this background, the problematic nature of corporate voluntary self-regulation becomes fully apparent. Recent years have seen a rapid rise in private regulation and incorporations’ participation in various forms of voluntary multistakeholder regulatory initiatives. These non-elected actors – retailers in particular - are designing and enforcing rules and norms that their structural power renders quasi compulsory. To legitimize this regulatory role they point to their presumed effectiveness and expertise, as well as their declared concern for consumer health and social and environmental issues. Research, however, turns up little evidence of a significantly positive impact of private food governance from these viewpoints. What benefits are generated tend to accrue to a small group of the global population, while retail standards tend to have negative effects on small-scale producers and small retail shops (Fuchs and Kalfagianni 2010, p. 26). Other students of private food governance have reached similar conclusions (Nestle 2007, Lang and Heasman 2004, Lang et al. 2009).

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) and multistakeholder standard setting initiatives are based on the logic that it is in the best interest of businesses to act responsibly with regard to environmental and social issues, while recognizing that shareholder profits is their bottom line. These approaches encounter several pitfalls (Clapp 2014). Those initiatives that take the form of broad sets of principles, like the UN Global Compact, are vague and weak in terms of what they ask for and the implementation and enforcement measures they foresee. Further, neither these loose frameworks nor more rigorous certification mechanisms attract adequate levels of participation. The “business case” for adhering to these schemes may hold for firms who make social and environmental responsibility a key feature of their business models, but these are a small minority of concerned companies. Even in these cases, firms often go for CSR measures that are also cost-cutting, like energy efficiency, and ignore more difficult measures such as biodiversity conservation (Clapp and Thistlethwaite 2012). Voluntary initiatives like CSR can be counterproductive in terms of improving corporate performance since they can offer businesses and

4 Communication by Philip Cerny at symposium on “Global Governance in the Post 2015 Era”, CUNY Graduate Center, 14 March 2016.
investors an easy and low-cost way of dissociating themselves from the negative externalities of their action.

In governance terms, multistakeholder initiatives for standard setting are embedded in a ‘liberal pluralism’ model based on the hypothesis that the public good will emerge from the procedure of bargaining and balancing the different interests of different parties. This approach is backed up by a narrative of ‘participation’ and ‘consensus’ that is supposed to neutralize political differences. In reality, empirical research suggests that multistakeholder standard setting initiatives tend to privilege the framing of the common good in terms of market competition, efficiency and productivity over alternative civic visions like solidarity and equity. In the same way, they tend to impose specific information formats (statistical and technical) and to exclude other forms of qualitative evidence and participation scenarios that are more congenial for affected communities (Cheyns and Riisgaard 2014).

From intergovernmental process to “global governance”

Sovereign states were the sole decision-makers when the United Nations was founded in 1945. Article 71 of the UN Charter empowered ECOSOC to make “suitable arrangements for consultation with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) which are concerned with matters within its competence”. From the outset, business associations were classified as “NGOs” although the members they represented were for-profit. The International Chamber of Commerce was granted consultative status to ECOSOC in 1946. In any event, accredited organizations’ status was limited to that of observers of a strictly inter-governmental process in a ritualized relation.

The UN remained frozen in the same procedures for forty years. Finally, in the late 1980s a cumulative combination of factors – from the end of the cold war to the triumph of state-restricting neo-liberal policies - succeeded in shaking up the situation. New categories of nongovernmental actors began to take interest in the impacts of global decisions. At the same time, popular movements of resistance to the impact of neoliberal policies were emerging. Economic globalization was relativizing national sovereignty and empowering a cast of corporate and financial actors as decision-makers outside of the institutional framework of the UN.

The UN system progressively recognized the need to open up strictly intergovernmental process to other actors. An authoritative locus for reflecting on these trends was the Commission on Global Governance, an independent group of 28 eminent individuals whose establishment was endorsed by the then UN Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali. In its report, Our Global Neighborhood, published in 1995, the Commission stated its case in the following terms.

States remain primary actors but have to work with others. The United Nations must play a vital role, but it cannot do all the work...Effective global decision-making ... must build partnerships--networks of institutions and processes--that enable global actors to pool information, knowledge, and capacities and to develop joint policies and practices on issues of common concern....This will involve reforming and strengthening the existing system of intergovernmental institutions, and improving its means of collaboration with private and independent groups. (Commission on Global Governance 1995).

5 See McKeon (2009) for a more detailed description of this process.
While some read the Commission’s recommendations as a well-meaning effort to address the shortcomings of sovereign states, others judged them to represent a managerial rather than a political approach to conducting the world’s affairs and a maquillage for neoliberal policies (Overbeek et al. 2010, p. 698). The recommendations were not implemented directly, but the Commission’s report remained on record as an important reference point in reflections on broadening the outreach of governance.

In terms of practice, the 1990s was the decade of the UN global summits, which constituted an unprecedented opening up to civil society organizations (CSOs). The term “NGO”, which had remained dominant for four decades, was increasingly felt to be too narrow to cover the universe it was expected to describe. The concept which began to come into use to replace it was that of “civil society”, an extremely heterogeneous category. For the purposes of this article the issues of concern are ones of representativity and legitimacy. Who has the right to speak for whom? Under what conditions can the views of the social actors directly concerned – particularly those with least voice – be heard and taken into account in decision-making? An important distinction in this regard is that between NGOs - voluntary, non-profit, intermediary organizations that provide services to disadvantaged sectors of the population but do not represent them – and what could be called “peoples’ organizations” directly established by and mandated to speak for these sectors: peasant farmers, artisanal fisherfolk, slum dwellers, and others.

How to situate business in this universe was a matter of debate. Of the over 1000 organizations accredited to ECOSOC in 1999, 155 were business associations representing solely commercial concerns (Willets 1999 quoted in Richter 2001 p. 33). The Rio outcome document, Agenda 21, took the unfortunate step of including “business and industry” as one of nine “Major Groups” which would constitute the UN’s interface with civil society on issues related to environment and development. This evolution was strongly contested at the civil society consultation organized in parallel to the World Food Conference convened in Rome by FAO in 1996. In contrast to other such events, normally dominated by NGOs, the organizers of the Rome consultation took a deliberate political decision to put representatives of rural social movements in the decision-making role, and they decisively refused to be placed in the same box as the private sector. We will see the impact, two decades later, of these quite different approaches to opening up UN deliberations beyond Member States when we compare the way in which multistakeholderism is conceived in the Committee on World Food Security and in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals.

**Stakeholders and multistakeholderism: the corporate vision**

The use of the term “stakeholder” was popularized in the business world starting in the 1960s. It responded to the increasingly evident need for management to go beyond “stockholders” to take into account the concerns of “any group of individual who is affected by or can affect the achievement of an organization’s objectives” (Freedman and McVee 2001). On the other side of the Atlantic Klaus Schwab took the idea a step further in 1971, the year in which he founded the World Economic Forum, by developing a multi-stakeholder concept with the corporation at the center and a multitude of stakeholders grouped around it, privileging those with commercial ties to the company (Schwab 2009).

A decade after the Commission on Global Governance tabled its report, the governments of Finland and Tanzania launched what came to be known as “The Helsinki Process on Globalisation and Democracy”. This hybrid consultative effort involved individuals with a wide variety of views, from people like Martin Khor of

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6 At the UN Environment and Development Conference in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, 1,378 organizations were registered, most of them lacking formal accreditation to the UN.
The cross-border nature of globalisation calls for all international actors to join hands, look for new alliances and coalitions... States still are and will continue to be the central actors in international organisations and as negotiators of international agreements. Nevertheless, for example civil society and the private sector should be given a more prominent role in preparing and implementing agreements as well as monitoring compliance with these agreements. (Helsinki Process 2008, p. 7).

The report was launched at the 63rd session of the UN General Assembly in September 2008 but the most rapid and enthusiastic follow-up took place outside of the UN, in the context of the World Economic Forum. In 2009 the WEF convened an international expert group to formulate a new system of global governance. This Global Redesign Initiative (GRI) involved the creation of 40 thematic Global Agenda Councils composed of a mixture of corporate, academic, government, religious, civil society personalities, all selected by the WEF and participating in their personal capacities. The final outcome was published in 2010 under a title which contained a programmatic play on words: Everybody’s Business: Strengthening International Cooperation in a More Interdependent World. The bottom line of the strategy is stated in the first transformative step proposed in the report:

Redefine the international system as constituting a wider, multifaceted system of global cooperation in which intergovernmental legal frameworks and institutions are embedded as a core, but not the sole and sometimes not the most crucial, component. (WEF 2010, p. 7)

The idea behind this pronouncement was to elevate the annual WEF conferences and the various existing experiments with multistakeholder approaches to addressing particular issues into what the most thorough analyst of the GRI, Harris Gleckman, defines as “a new explicit form of global governance”.

Multi-stakeholder groups, PPPs, or coalitions of the willing and able... would be expected to take the lead in addressing unresolved global issues...Those Multinational Corporations, countries, civil society bodies, academic institutions, and parts of the UN that share a common approach could take it upon themselves to act. The official intergovernmental system can defer to these joint partnerships, provide de facto recognition to a multi-stakeholder process, or provide legality after the fact to the outcomes of a given PPP. (Gleckman 2016, p. 97).

Governance is transferred from a wobbling, often ineffective intergovernmental system - intrinsically if insufficiently democratic, legitimate and transparent – to more decisive and proactive self-selected and intrinsically self-interested elite bodies. This would involve serious changes in the way governance is conducted:

- Defining global issues in terms that are heavily influenced by the interests of the multinational corporations, such that market-based solutions are likely to be identified as the “best” outcome;
- Introducing a selection system of participants for a given multi-stakeholder governance arrangement without public review and following criteria that would be likely to favor corporate interests and exclude those adversely affected by corporate action.
- Creating decision-making processes without concern for power imbalances or protections for minority views.

For a detailed description and analysis of the GRI see Gleckman (2012).
Undermining the nature of the commitment to the outcome of a global decision-making system, since the corporations who would be leading the process would not assume the obligations and liabilities that are traditionally assigned to nation-states (Gleckman 2013).

The overall result, inevitably, would be to compromise the legitimacy and public acceptance of intergovernmental processes. WEF directors accept this and foresee that, over time, “policy-making process and institutional structures themselves will need to be adapted and perhaps even fundamentally repositioned” (Gleckman 2016, p. 97).

The Global Food, Agriculture and Nutrition Redesign Initiative (GFANRI) provides an excellent illustration of how the GRI operates to elude accountable governance and advance an approach to problem-solving that responds to neoliberal visions. The membership of the Councils that designed it was skewed towards transnational food corporations, with other private sector-oriented entities like the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), the Gates Foundation, the corporate-led Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN), and a sprinkling of people from governments and UN agencies. Not surprisingly, their analysis of the context highlights the need to increase production to meet the needs of a growing population drawing on “the powerful capabilities and reach of the private food, agricultural, and distribution sectors” (WEF 2010, p. 367). Equally, the solutions foreseen are biased towards strengthening the role of commercial food producers and agribusiness, harnessing emerging technologies including GMOs and - stated in almost ingenuously self-serving terms - such innovative steps as “harmonizing the commercial production of new foods for children with the purchase of these products for public distribution and food assistance” (WEF 2010, pp. 369).

One of the operating principles at work in the GRI is that of networking and infiltrating other processes rather than taking centre stage with a WEF label. Existing initiatives in 2010 targeted for “synergetic action” included the WEF’s corporate-led New Vision for Agriculture which was busy giving birth to coalitions in Africa (Grow Africa – including the G7-promoted New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition) and subsequently Asia (Grow Asia) which have provided entry points for corporations with the blessing and legitimation of the respective regional authorities, AU/NEPAD and ASEAN (McKeon 2014). We will return to the infiltratory nature of the corporate strategy in the following sections of this paper on the UN and the Committee on World Food Security.

3. Corporate influence on formal global governance and the UN system today

It is the shortsightedness and narrow self-interest of sovereign member states of the United Nations, their failure to adequately fund multilateral institutions and programmes and to make them operate effectively in addressing global problems, that creates a governance vacuum which corporations and private sector foundations can rush in to fill.

The arrival of Kofi Annan as Secretary-General in 1997, in parallel with the refusal of the US to pay its assessed contribution to the UN in full, marked a change in UN policy towards the acceptance of corporate funding and PPPs. This change was underwritten by powerful UN Member States, themselves beholden to corporate funding to various degrees, and underpinned by the dominant neoliberal discourse which legitimated the free market, technology-led “modernization” and global supply chain efficiency as the way forward. The UN Global Compact- a main conduit for UN-corporate partnerships - was crafted in the WEF in 1999, launched by the Secretary-General in 2000, and progressively supported in the General Assembly
Public-private partnerships as a development modality

Public-private partnerships have mushroomed over the past 15 years, with a particular explosion at the Rio+10 Conference in Johannesburg in 2002 in the form of ‘Type II Partnerships alongside of the usual intergovernmental agreements. Corporations have been able to normalize themselves as aid actors under a development paradigm that focuses on narrowly-defined “effectiveness” and “results-based management” and in a period of financial crisis in which donor discourse laments the scarcity of resources for ODA while billions of dollars are injected into “saving banks”. IFPRI defines PPPs as “collaborative mechanisms in which public organizations and private entities share resources, knowledge, and risks in order to achieve more efficiency in the production and delivery of products and services” (Hartwich et al 2008 p. vii). In theory, PPPs should make it possible to profit from the capacities and resources of private entities and shift some of the risk of service provision to them while anchoring accountability solidly in the public sector. In reality, accountability tends to drop out of the picture altogether while corporations manage to evade the bulk of the risks involved in investment by pushing governments to twist rules and regulations to their advantage.

There is no sound evidence that such arrangements make a positive contribution to sustainable development and food security. On the contrary, even leaving aside NGO denunciations (e.g. OXFAM 2014) a conference organized by UNRISD in 2006 noted that “whereas the donor discourse emphasizes the potentials of PPPs to create win-win situations...more critical academic work has emphasized the limitations of PPPs in relation to possible cooptation of NGOs, state and UN agencies and a weakening of efforts to hold transnational corporations accountable for their actions” (Pingeot 2014 p. 6). A study commissioned by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, notoriously private sector-friendly, found that “the empirical evidence on the effectiveness and efficiency of PPP’s is notably scarce. PPP evaluations focus on resource sharing but pay little attention to the risk-sharing and revenue distribution dimension of partnerships” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Netherlands 2013). An assessment of PPPs operated by the World Bank, conducted by its Independent Evaluation Group, found that important aspects of public service delivery – for instance, access, pro-poor aspects, and quality of service delivery – were not being measured since the existing WB monitoring and evaluation systems primarily focus on the PPPs’ business performance (IEG nd).

An FAO overview of PPPs in the field of agriculture listed a series of success conditions that, if applied scrupulously, would practically exclude large-scale corporate investments. Partnerships should “(i) be carefully designed according to the principles for responsible investments, taking into careful consideration the degree of inclusiveness of the business model proposed; (ii) ensure that the right legislative and policy frameworks are in place to avoid negative socio-environmental impacts on local economies (e.g. land expropriation, loss of livelihoods, depletion of natural resources); and (iii) ensure compliance with international best practices should national frameworks not provide adequate safeguards”(Paglietti and Sabrie 2013). It has been estimated that only 12% of all small-scale producers, almost all men, can fulfill the conditions required by contract farming, the main modality for “inclusive” agricultural PPPs (Vorley et al. 2012, p6). Yet recipient governments are enjoined to establish “enabling environments” for corporate investment. Donor governments, for their part, are expected to use public aid funds as “patient capital” or “leveraging grants” to cover up-front costs so corporations can start to make profits right away (FAO 2012a, p336) rather than investing in infrastructure and services suited to supporting small-scale producers’ own investments, which are estimated to constitute 90% of all investment in agriculture (FAO 2012b). PPPs, some researchers have found, can lead to abdication of state-actors’ responsibility to provide public goods (Schaferhoff et al. 2007). In most basic terms, the emphasis on PPPs turns complex questions of economic,
social, environmental justice into technical problems that can be solved by bringing in corporate knowhow and capital. The background of politics and power relations is simply ignored (Lund-Thomsen 2007).

**Corporate influence on the UN agenda and the SDGs**

The overall trend today, sparked by donor underfunding of core UN system activities and preference for programme-specific earmarked funding, is towards “a new era of selective multilateralism, shaped by … the growing reliance on corporate-led solutions to global problems...that endorses voluntarism and opportunism and gives the UN stamp of approval and legitimacy to many initiatives not framed and shaped by UN values and standards of inclusiveness” (Adams and Martens 2015). In 1997 48% of the UN’s development activities were financed through core resources. By 2013 75% were funded through non-core and mostly earmarked projects. Applying business logic to multilateral programming, the private sector and corporate philanthropy are pushing quick win solutions focused largely on technical aspects, to the detriment of the essential normative work of the UN (ibid. p. 8).

Corporations exercised considerable influence on the process of drafting and negotiating the UN Sustainable Development Goals. To do so they adopted multiple and mutually-reinforcing channels, some of them directly facilitated by the Secretary-General. An elite LEAD group was established within the Global Compact to formulate and advocacy its inputs. The Sustainable Development Solutions Network launched by the SG in 2012 had 21 corporations represented in its Leadership Council as compared with 9 NGOs. UNILEVER CEO Paul Polman played a prominent role in the SG’s High Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, whose report highlighted the key word “Partnership”. The Business & Industry Major Group made inputs to the SDG process. The Major Groups was the only channel open also to civil society, decidedly disempowered in its engagement as compared with the corporate voice. The main corporate messages highlighted a focus on growth and technology as the motors of sustainable development, a key role for corporations with governments reduced essentially to “creating enabling environments”, and a need for multistakeholder governance. As always in corporate and corporate-friendly discourse, inequality and power imbalances are ignored, the solutions proposed are market-based, public regulation is downplayed, and people and communities are reduced to individual producers or consumers who interact with the world through economic exchanges. This narrative has left a strong imprint on the SDGs, particularly on Goal 17 which frames the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development in terms of finance and investments, technology, trade and multistakeholder partnerships, with a nod to capacity-building (whose? for what?), policy coherence (to enhance global macroeconomic stability) and statistical data. Among the thematic areas in which corporate-led multistakeholderism has made greatest headway is that of nutrition, with the Gates Foundation acting as the agenda setter among the corporate foundations, in close alliance with the three UN family agencies whose directors are named by the US - UNICEF, WFP and the World Bank - and with the office of the UN Secretary-General and his special representative for food security and nutrition. Operating over the past decade, this powerful combination, has managed to essentially shut down the UN Standing Committee on Nutrition, the harmonizing body on global nutrition programming in which civil society was well represented and from which corporate interests were excluded. The strategy was to fill the gap with the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) movement founded in 2010 by what its website describes as “concerned individuals from governments, agencies and groups” under the coordination of the UN Secretary-General’s special representative for food and nutrition security. SUN is a global multistakeholder platform closely linked to others mentioned above, from Grow Africa and Asia to GAIN, the New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition and the Global Food, Agriculture and Nutrition Redesign Initiative. It is replicated in platforms at national level in which, according to civil society critiques, the multinational business world is allowed to weigh in on national policy decisions in such directions as

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8 For a detailed account of “the corporate capture of food and nutrition governance” see Valente 2016.
prioritizing corporate-manufactured supplements and the medicalization of nutrition as against diversified local food production and healthy diets. Opposition to the take-over of nutrition governance by the SUN movement has come from the social movements and civil society organizations engaged with the reformed Committee on World Food Security, to which we will now turn.

4. Multistakeholderism and the Committee on World Food Security

As compared with institutional developments elsewhere in the UN system over the past two decades, the reform of the Committee on World Food Security in 2009 has been characterized by the direct engagement of social movement constituencies representing those most directly affected by the policies under discussion.

This outcome was the result of a decade of networking by rural social movements stimulated by the parallel civil society forums to the World Food Summits convened by FAO in 1996 and 2002 referred to above. The principle of food sovereignty, introduced by the global peasant network La Via Campesina in 1996, was adopted by the entire assembly in 2002. Food sovereignty turns upside-down the logic of the corporate-led global food supply system by invoking the right of peoples to define their own healthy and sustainable food and agriculture systems. It prioritizes food production for domestic and local markets based on small-scale agroecological production systems supported by public policies and investments and defends peoples’ access to and control over productive resources (Nyéleni 2007; Wittman et al. 2010). The 2002 Forum mandated the network that had emerged from the preparatory work, the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC), to carry forward the Action Agenda it adopted. Over the past decade the IPC has opened up political space for rural movements in global FAO forums and has coached them in how to occupy it effectively.

The 2007/2008 food price crisis opened up a window of political opportunity for change that the food sovereignty movement was ready to seize thanks to a decade of capacity building. The crisis unveiled a global governance vacuum whereby, in the absence of an authoritative and democratic global food security forum, decisions in this fundamental area were being taken by default by institutions like the WTO and World Bank whose remit is not food security, by donor government groups like the G8, and by economic actors like corporations and financial speculators. Among the reactions of the international community, the only one that sought policy-led solutions to the causes of the crisis was a proposal to reform the existing but ineffectual UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) based in the FAO. Against all odds, this last option won thanks to an alliance among a number of G77 governments, FAO, and the food sovereignty movement.

The reform was an unprecedentedly inclusive and transparent process. The IPC facilitated participation by rural movements, helping to block attempts by some governments to limit the political weight of the renewed forum. The reformed CFS is recognized as the foremost inclusive global food forum, entitling it to promote policy coherence among the myriad institutions that impact on food security. It deliberates on food issues from a human rights perspective. Civil society organizations are recognized as full participants, not observers as elsewhere in the UN system. They intervene throughout the debate on the same footing.

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9 For a detailed account of the reform of the CFS and its impact on global food security governance see McKeon 2015.
10 The IPC is an autonomous, self-managed global network of some 45 people’s movements and NGOs involved with at least 800 organizations throughout the world. Its membership includes constituency focal points (organizations representing small farmers, fisher folk, pastoralists, Indigenous Peoples, agricultural workers), regional focal points, and thematic focal points (NGO networks with particular expertise on priority issues). It is not a centralized structure and does not claim to represent its members. It is rather a space for self-selected CSOs which identify with the food sovereignty agenda adopted at the 2002 forum.
as governments and accompany the CFS intergovernmental Bureau all year round helping to determine the agenda and frame the debate. The private sector is in the room as a separate constituency, not confounded with civil society as in the Major Groups or Non-State Actors configurations\textsuperscript{11}. Decision-making takes place in plenary sessions and at the end of the debate it is the governments who decide and hence can be held accountable. Finally, the reform document seeks to build bridges between global policy decisions and what actually happens on the ground and encourages replication of inclusive policy processes at all levels.

Civil society’s right to self-organization is recognized and the resulting autonomous Civil Society Mechanism (CSM) assigns priority voice to constituencies representing those most affected by food insecurity: peasant farmers, artisanal fisherfolk, pastoralists, indigenous peoples, agricultural workers, landless, urban poor, consumers, rural women and youth. NGOs are expected to play a supportive role. The private sector has also autonomously established its own interface mechanism. It should reach out to all kinds of businesses, including small and medium enterprises in the global south, but in fact it represents the corporate sector.

Business interest in the CFS was minimal at the beginning but the intensity of corporate engagement increased once it became evident that the reformed CFS was becoming a significant global policy forum.\textsuperscript{12}

Over its first 9 years of activity, thanks in good measure to the determined engagement of small-scale food producers and other social constituencies, the reformed CFS has proved to be a propitious forum for challenging dominant discourse that sanctifies the corporate food regime and for changing the terms of the debate. It has been recognized in politically negotiated recommendations that small-scale producers are responsible for 70% of the food produced in the world and 90% of all investments in agriculture. Furthermore, the bulk of the food consumed world-wide transits not through agri-business food chains and supermarkets but through territorial markets that offer far more substantial benefits in terms of rural livelihoods, national economies and job creation, and nutritious diets (CSM 2016a). The CFS is also generating progressive normative guidance, notably in the form of the first-ever global negotiated guidelines on tenure of land and other natural resources, adopted in May 2012, which social movements are now putting to use in all regions in support of peoples’ struggles (CSM 2016b).

These very successes have contributed to a backlash that seeks to downplay the political weight of the processes exercised in the CFS and to blur the distinction between a CFS which accords priority voice to the marginalized and the multistakeholderism style that dominates elsewhere in the UN system. The arms adopted in this attack include a professed concern to maintain “balance”, such that if something is “given” to the small-scale producers something has to go in return to the corporations - agroecology and “climate-smart agriculture” in the same breath. Equally pernicious is the tendency to work towards pre-cooked ‘consensus’ outcomes that negate the real and serious differences of interest and vision which characterize the different categories of participants and that empty the CFS plenaries of political significance. The Private Sector Mechanism is claiming equal speaking rights with the CSM, although the reform document clearly accords priority voice to the vulnerable, and there is strong pressure to carve out a monolithic ‘farmers’ constituency’ (as in the Major Groups system) conflating big commercial farmers with small-scale family farmers who defend very different positions and are already well represented in the CSM. Seeking to water down the human rights framework and stalemating progress in setting up an effective monitoring system capable of holding governments to account are other tools. The civil society

\textsuperscript{11} One of the six key unresolved issues at the very eve of adoption of the reform was whether private sector associations should be full participants or observers. Only strong insistence by the US pushed them into the participant category.

\textsuperscript{12} The number of private sector participants at the annual plenary sessions has increased from 1 in 2010 to over 150 in 2016, of which 30-40% at CEO/Executive Director level.
mechanism, in alliance with other members committed to defending the innovative nature of the CFS, has made monitoring a priority. It is also working to achieve acknowledgement of the issues of power imbalance that accompany the presence of the corporate private sector in the CFS and promote appropriate steps to guard against conflicts of interest.

Conclusion

Transnational corporations’ rights are protected by hard laws with strong enforcement tools, while their obligations – such as they are - are backed only by soft laws and voluntary guidelines. How to correct this imbalance is one of the greatest challenges that need to be addressed in order to defend common goods and peoples’ rights, and the task becomes more arduous the more corporations assume regulatory responsibility and enter into governance spaces. The Committee on World Food Security is the global UN policy forum in which marginalized sectors of the population have most voice, which they are using to good effect, and it is often cited as a model which should inspire SDG governance. What lessons can be learned from the CFS’ experience that could help to contrast the spread of multistakeholderism?

Fighting against the conceptual wooliness on which corporate infiltration of governance thrives is a prime necessity. The very terminology employed is up for grabs. “Multi-actor” or “multi-stakeholder”? Platforms or partnerships? “Partnerships” is the winning word in SDG implementation discourse, and the long list posted on the SDG website\(^{13}\) privileges global multistakeholder consortia focused on concrete action to meet specific targets in line with what their members feel are appropriate strategies. These partnerships suffer from all of the democracy deficits associated with the Global Redesign Initiative discussed above. SDG implementation should surely not start in multistakeholder cloud-land. Rather, the first step is to contextualize and politicize the goals in national policies and strategies through deliberation in inclusive platforms that bring together the government and national constituencies, particularly the most vulnerable. Democratically determined policy should guide investments, not the other way around. It is essential to clarify the implications of different approaches to policy decision-making and programme planning and establish unequivocal parameters for equitable multi-actor deliberation.

Resisting corporate capture of the human rights framework is another necessity. The UN moves in the wrong direction when it champions CSR and multistakeholder approaches though initiatives like the Global Compact and the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.\(^{14}\) Human rights services performed to legitimize corporate behavior under CSR frameworks are becoming a veritable business with the result of depoliticizing human rights concerns by translating them into technical standardized language and deflecting attention from the issues of inequality and oppression which they are intended to address (Tuta 2014). One of the most problematic transformations wrought by pro-corporation alchemists in the US has been the “assumption of the guise of personhood” by corporations endowing them with rights and freedoms and giving birth to the ideological construct of the corporate citizen (Bowman cited in Fuchs 2007: 48-49). It is imperative to insist on the distinction between governments as the duty bearers in the HR framework, vulnerable people as rights-holders, and businesses as potential rights violators.

Attacking the relatively soft discursive underbelly of corporate power is an important part of the strategy. This is happening in the reformed CFS, but such demystification needs to be multiplied. A range of research demonstrates that multistakeholder mechanisms are not as neutral as is often presumed and tend to negate the complex power mechanisms at play (Cheyns and Riisgaard 2014, Cammaerts forthcoming). There is also ample evidence that past experience with multistakeholder arrangements, such as the Type 2

\(^{13}\) https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/partnerships/

\(^{14}\) Developed by the Human Rights Council in 2011
partnerships launched at Rio+10, has been largely negative (Pattberg and Widerberg 2016) yet both the UN and corporations maintain the partnership rhetoric as part of their legitimation strategies (Backstrand & Kylsater 2104). Inquiry into corporations’ strategies in engaging in multistakeholder arrangements indicates, not surprisingly, that they adhere to those which valorize their current or desired practices and avoid those which would require changes they feel would not be in line with their business strategies. Additional research needs to be conducted, but the existing evidence also should be consolidated and brought to bear on policy processes.

These issues, of course, are not just conceptual. Translating them into real life requires networked transcalar action to resist corporate violence and the privatization of common goods, and to hold governments to account. The Global Campaign to Dismantle Corporate Power and Stop Impunity, linking hundreds of global, regional and national organizations, has played an important role in advocating for the launch of work in the Human Rights Council on an internationally binding instrument to regulate the activities of TNCs. Another example of a successful multi-territorial approach is the strategy adopted by activists opposing the “blood sugar” value chain in Cambodia, which involves mounting linked legal resistance in the different countries in which different value chain actors are domiciled (Ferrando 2105). In Ecuador popular pressure contributed to the government’s decision in 2013 to establish a Citizens’ Commission for the Audit of Investment Treaties under international arbitration and to resign from the World Bank’s International Centre for the Settlement of Investment Disputes where the vast majority of the cases are decided in favor of TNCs (Espinosa 2015). Convergence should be built among initiatives like these in different regions and in various areas, from land grabbing to mineral extraction, water, energy, public health and others.

One of the award winners in the 1994 edition of the Berlin Film Festival was a Colombian film entitled “The Strategy of the Snail” which recounts the struggle of the low-income tenants of a building in Bogotà to avoid eviction by the rich and unscrupulous landowner supported by the forces of law and order. Adopting a mix of solidarity, courage, appropriate technology, support by engaged intellectuals and professionals, clever strategizing and a good dose of fantasy, the group manages to transfer the house and its inhabitants to a hill overlooking the city leaving only the façade, that crumbles away to nothing when the troops bang on the door on eviction day.

The story is in some ways analogous to that of the food sovereignty movement as a global peoples’ network and the Committee on World Food Security as a multi-actor forum. Thanks largely to civil society engagement, the CFS is resisting the advance of multistakeholderism, attacking dominant discourse and generating normative guidance that can be used to support peoples’ local and national struggles. If it continues on this route it might help preserve safe space in which the movement can grow to a point where it can help fragment the global hegemony of the corporate food system in favor of a sustainable territorially-rooted, multi-actor governed approach to food provision. But it will take all of the assets the Bogotà tenants had at their disposition, and a touch of political will on the part of a government or two willing to go down the line in defense of human rights and the common good would do no harm.

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